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## *Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology* by Adrienne Mayor

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### ***Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology* by Adrienne Mayor**

#### **Abstract**

This review briefly describes and assesses the chapter by chapter content of the book and the author's discussion of the imagining of robotics and artificial intelligence by the ancient Greeks in the art and literature.

#### **Additional Keywords**

Classical Myth; Classical Art; Prometheus; Hephaestus; Medea; Daedalus; Pygmalion; lost wax casting

law encountered C.S. Lewis in the early 1980s when Rev. Michael Sartelle—who was the young, erudite, and enthusiastic pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Yazoo City, Mississippi—took to his pulpit one Sunday morning and told his congregation that everyone needed to read *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Sartelle often used quotes from Lewis in his sermons, and his congregation began reading the Narnia stories and other books their pastor recommended. This went on until 1992 when Pastor Sartelle died in a car accident while traveling with his family. His death so upset Sartelle's congregation that it was difficult for them to speak of it; however, when they share memories of their pastor, the conversation often turns to his passion for the writings of Lewis. His former churchgoers often recall when Sartelle spoke about the creator of Narnia in his sermons. For instance, some of them talk about how Sartelle would preach with power and authority from the pulpit when speaking on a scene from a Narnia story or quoting from *Mere Christianity*. It can sound like a movie scene from *Shadowlands*, which is interesting because many of these people have become avid readers of Lewis's writings.

I have often believed that a sort of imaginative or cultural symbiosis exists between us and the authors we cherish, which might explain another of Derrick's arguments. "In America," she argues, "fans often describe reading Lewis's books in rapturous tones" (3). Derrick also claims that we have to turn our gaze beyond Lewis to understand why he continues to be read long after he (and many of his lesser known contemporaries) have passed on: her larger question is "how is renown made and kept?" (5). In Yazoo City, some of those who mourned the loss of Sartelle still continue to read the works of C.S. Lewis because for them Lewis is not merely an author but a link of continuity to their former pastor and their past. This seems to support what Derrick says about readers playing a part in the making and keeping of Lewis's renown: "Lewis's reception, in other words, is a way to view *ourselves*" (6).

—Chad Chisholm



**GODS AND ROBOTS: MYTHS, MACHINES, AND ANCIENT DREAMS OF TECHNOLOGY.** Adrienne Mayor. Princeton UP, 2018. 304 pp. 75 b/w illus. 11 color illus. Bibliography and index. ISBN 978-0-691-18351-0 ebook 978-0-691-18544-6. \$29.95.

*G*ODS AND ROBOTS IS AN IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION of how the ancient Greeks imagined the possibility of robots and artificial intelligence in their literature and art. While clearly useful for reference, I found this book an

entertaining and informative cover-to-cover read featuring the expected characters—Hephaestus, Medea, Daedalus, Pygmalion, and Prometheus—but with unanticipated depth and dimension created by way of many lesser known details, sources, and illustrations. This is a wonderful “eureka” book for anyone in search of the deep origin story of robotics and AI; a delightful confirmation for art historians who already know the truth from studying all those Greek statues, vase paintings, and the lost wax method of bronze casting; and a possible epiphany for Marvel fans and science-fiction and fantasy readers looking for more back story on their favorite superheroes. As for me—I belong to all of the aforementioned categories—henceforth, any attention I give to any Greek myth in literature or art will include a cross-reference to *Gods and Robots*, not because Mayor is the first person to notice all those artificial creatures and their implications, but because she has put her knowledge of ancient technology together with the myths and art and then breathed life into the conflation by way of intelligent discussion and comparisons with modern day engineering and science fiction.

Chapter 1 is primarily about the first robot, Talos, said to have been created by Hephaestus to protect Crete, and his defeat by Medea when he threatened Jason and his Argonauts. The connections Mayor draws between the lost wax method of casting, blood-letting practices of the day, and the “ichor” that served as the “blood” of the gods is so compelling that I briefly wondered if this foray into Greek science-fiction was going to carry on into a theory about alien invaders or lost civilizations that actually possessed the ability to create life-like androids or replicants. Indeed, I wondered at some point in every chapter if Mayor herself wondered if such were possible, but she never crosses that line. She meticulously maintains (and repeats) her purpose as the detailing of the fact that the ancient Greeks *imagined* the possibility of artificial life and intelligence, which is in itself only the pre-requisite for its invention. Chapter 2 tells more about Medea’s mastery of bio-chemistry, as she is able to extend the life of Jason’s father Aeson, who was usurped by the evil Pelias. Media uses Pelias’s greed for a similar longevity to orchestrate his murder. Chapter 3 expands the discussion of scientifically achieved immortality, longevity, and/or the appearance of youth and its associated problems.

In Chapter 4, the focus shifts to Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus, and the story of how Epimetheus gave away all the gifts for survival before he got to humankind. Prometheus saved the day by stealing fire and technology for them, and then suffered the punishment meted out by Zeus of having his liver eaten out every day by an eagle. Medea, incidentally, uses the blood/ichor shed by Prometheus in a potion she gives to Jason to enhance his intelligence and strength such that he survives a confrontation with some nasty artificial fire-breathing bulls. However, one of the main points of this chapter is

to enlarge the theme of how advances in technology fuel ambition, and from there, we move on to Chapter 5 and Daedalus and the consequences of flying too close to the sun with waxen wings. This chapter also includes an expanded discussion of the life-likeness achievable by lost-wax bronze casting and how motion or the appearance of motion was achieved in some ancient devices. In Chapter 6, Mayor's analysis and comparison of illustrations showing Hephaestus building an artificial being from the skeleton out with Pygmalion's lifelike statue really animate the event, as it were. Hephaestus's talents are further showcased in Chapter 7; notable is the practice of illustrating artificial horses hobbled, as real horses were, as if to suggest that they too need contrivances to hold them to their place. Chapter 8 sets out another comparison, that of Pandora—whom Hephaestus made by Zeus's command to give to Epimetheus and thereby bring about the downfall of humankind—with the biblical Eve.

The final chapter restates the author's thesis and many points from the book proper, including a caution not to attribute modern motivations to ancient creators. However, as Mayor repeatedly shows us, the ancient Greeks understood artificial beings and intelligence in relation to their uses in war, entertainment, sex, and labor, and, as she indicates, have many modern counterparts, from Maria in *Metropolis* to Robocop and the Terminator, not to mention real world advancements in robotics and AI. The chapters yet to be written by Mayor's own counterpart in the future will undoubtedly address the ongoing efforts of humans to bring their technology up to the standards set by their imaginations, to reinvent the "merely" mythical as reality.

Mayor is not the first person to notice all the artificial beings in Greek myth, nor is she the first to realize that Greek mythology is all about possibility, but she is certainly the first to put it all together into one coherent story—or rather, one coherent history—that shows how the mythologies of the past and present can become the reality of the future. Thus, this book belongs in every library—public or university—with users interested in mythology, the history of technology, science fiction (literature and film), and, of course, art history. Instructors may also find Mayor's lecture about her book at the Chicago Humanities Festival useful as well: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp4xzRC66SA>.

—Emily E. Auger

